

Residents get look at Texas 360 plan

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By Robert Cadwallader

Written comments on the Texas 360 project are still being accepted. The letters must be postmarked by Oct. 28 and mailed to:

Texas Department of Transportation

Attention: Sonja Land

Strategic Project Division Environmental Coordinator

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Mesquite, TX 75150

Victor Gutzler shies away from Texas 360 and Broad Street because of constant peak-time traffic congestion, but he liked what he saw on the schematic diagrams of the new 360 that stretched across 30 folding tables at a public hearing Thursday night.

He was among about 300 who attended the meeting on a proposed \$625 million project that would build multiple toll-way lanes between the existing frontage roads from just south of Interstate 20 to U.S. 287, about 9.2 miles. The Texas Department of Transportation, which hosted the meeting at Timberview High School, is finalizing an environmental assessment that would clear the way for design and construction of the lanes.

“It’s been long overdue,” said Gutzler, a resident of the sprawling Mira Lagos subdivision in southwest Grand Prairie. “They should’ve done this 20 years ago, but it kept getting shoved further and further down the list.”

Scarcity of transportation funding gets the blame for both the delays and the shift toward a toll way as the only means to get it done in the foreseeable future, TxDOT and local officials said.

James Young, co-founder of the Mansfield Business Association, struck a desperate tone in an e-mail urging members to attend the public hearing, which focused on the environmental study but was open to all spoken and written comments.

“Some will oppose a toll road, but those that do need to be outnumbered,” Young wrote. “If the toll road is not approved, there will be no relief in many of our lifetimes.”

What TxDOT calls 360's ultimate expansion would be an eight-lane toll way from the main highway's current end at East Sublett Road/West Camp Wisdom Road south to Broad Street, and six lanes from Broad Street to U.S. 287. But the project is scalable so that it can be built as funding becomes available. TxDOT said the likely interim project would build four toll lanes for the first leg to Broad Street, and a "Super Two Lane" -- one lane each way separated by an alternating-direction passing lane -- from Broad to 287.

Construction on that version would begin in 2015 and finish in 2018. The ultimate expansion might not happen until around 2035, according to plans.

TxDOT said a toll price has not been determined but that based on the average toll rate of 16 cents per mile, a typical motorist would pay about \$1.47 per one-way trip.

Sixteen people spoke during the hearing, none specifically opposing the project. Almost all were city officials and business leaders from Texas 360-adjacent communities who reiterated their support. Another 45 people submitted written comments that will be entered into the official record of the 360 approval process, said TxDOT spokeswoman Lisa Walzl.

Several state and local officials said the project is on the home stretch and expect a finding of "no significant impact" on the environmental assessment, which is required for moving the project forward. Most of the environmental issues were addressed during development of the 360 frontage roads years ago, they said.

TxDOT has almost all the right of way it needs for the project, except for 31 parcels totaling six acres still to be acquired, Jeny Houdmann, an agency right-of-way agent, told the audience. No residential, commercial or public structures will be displaced, she said.

"It will be fantastic," Mansfield Mayor David Cook said. "It will be a convenience for our residents. Also, more importantly in my opinion, from an economic standpoint it will have a huge impact on Mansfield."

Michael Morris, transportation director of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, cited traffic congestion and safety as the main reasons for the project. He said 150 accidents occurred on southbound Texas 360 from Mayfield Road to Green Oaks Boulevard in 2012. He said two-thirds of those were rear-end collisions, and that two-thirds of those collisions resulted in injuries.

“It’s an amazingly large number of accidents, and it’s an amazing percentage resulting in significant injuries,” said Morris, who was among the speakers.

Most at the hearing didn’t stay for the public-comments session. They apparently were mainly interested in the schematics – renderings of the lanes that were laid out over satellite images on a 1-inch-equals-100-feet scale -- and asking questions of TxDOT officials who manned the the exhibits.

“Is this going to make my property value go up or down?” Brian Rogers asked one official as he pointed to a lot backed up to a 360 frontage road, where he built his house a few months ago. “If I had known about this, I wouldn’t have built it there.” Rogers, accompanied by his 12-year-old son Calven Johnson, added that he’s no fan of the toll plans.

“I’d pay a toll going to another state, but why are we paying tolls just to go from work to home?” Rogers said. “It just doesn’t make sense.”